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NCC APPROVES MIDDLE EAST POLICY STATEMENT

NEW YORK -- The 266-member Governing Board of the National Council of Churches has approved a new Middle East policy which urges Israel to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the PLO to recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state.

The key to a lasting and just peace between Israel and the Palestinians, the Council's Governing Board said at its Nov. 6-8 sessions, is mutual recognition by each side of the other's right to self-determination.

Because the PLO is at present "the only organized voice of the Palestinian people," the statement argued, negotiations involving the Palestinian question must include the PLO.

But such participation must come only after the PLO officially recognizes Israel's right to exist as a sovereign, Jewish state, the Board added. The PLO must both renounce its earlier statement that it seeks the destruction of Israel and cease all hostile acts.

In turn, Israel must also cease hostile acts and "officially declare its recognition of the right of Palestinians to self-determination, including the option of a sovereign state apart from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan."

Adopted after more than a year of hearings, study and discussions, the action was immediately denounced as "naive" by leading U.S. Jewish organizations, which had refused to participate in the consultation process that led to the new policy.

The Israeli government has long insisted that the PLO was primarily a terrorist organization and as such, had no place at the bargaining table. But the NCC statement argued that the PLO "functions as the only organized voice of the Palestinian people and appears to be the only body able to negotiate a settlement on their behalf."

On this issue, the Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt were understood by the NCC to be inadequate for lack of PLO participation.

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The call for PLO involvement in negotiations and for a Palestinian state outside of Jordan provoked an outcry from major United States Jewish agencies even in the earliest stages of the policy's development.

Last February 17 Jewish organizations boycotted the invitation to present their case at NCC Middle East Panel hearings. And, when the panel report was made ready for a first reading at the previous Governing Board meeting last May, several of those organizations publicly denounced it. Representatives of the United States Palestinian community, on the other hand, offered cautious praise then for the report.

The new NCC action produced the same reaction. Just prior to the November Governing Board meeting, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith asked the NCC's president, the Rev. M. William Howard, to defer action on the policy statement for "further discussions and study."

"I do not expect either American Palestinians or American Jews to like everything in our policy statement," Howard explained after the meeting. "But I think they would be missing a very important opportunity if they did not promote those aspects of the policy statement which they do applaud, and see that those points which both sides applaud at least deserve careful attention."

The Rev. Joan B. Campbell, the Council executive responsible for Christian-Jewish relations, added that the NCC "is trying to play some kind of bridge role between the two sides of the conflict."

"I believe we have a difficult time ahead in Christian-Jewish relations," she added. "And it will require a great deal of work. But I don't believe there will be a break between the Christian and Jewish communities."

Although the final vote on the policy statement was unanimous, debate on its stance regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was sharp. The Episcopal Church delegation proposed a series of amendments to change the statements on the PLO, though all were defeated by substantial margins.

The Rev. William A. Norgren, the Episcopal Church's associate ecumenical officer, said: "Most of the Episcopal delegation worked hard to amend the statement, particularly its assertion that the Palestine Liberation Organization is 'the only organized voice' of Palestinians, and its faint praise of the process of the Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt. We failed, but we voted for the policy statement as a whole because its 32 pages still contain much useful material for consideration by the churches."

On the other side, members of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese in North America proposed that the concept of a "Jewish" state of Israel be deleted from the policy statement. This too failed to pass.

In other actions the Board:

- created a special panel to study and propose policy on bioethical issues such as genetic engineering;
- took a first look at proposed new constitutional language that would change the Council from a "cooperative agency" to a "community of churches," heightening the commitment demanded of its member bodies;
- heard a report on minority hiring within the Council and discussed ways to improve implementation of its affirmative action policy;
- conducted a "first reading" of a proposed policy statement on immigration, refugees and migrants, which if passed next May would call on the U.S. government to grant permanent residence status to undocumented persons who have lived in the U.S. for at least five years;
- rejoiced at the end of the J. P. Stevens boycott and pledged to continue its support of the workers who recently signed their first union contract with the company;
- called on the U.S. Senate to ratify the United Nations Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women;
- supported the goals of the United Nations' International Year of Disabled Persons (1981), which are to fully integrate such people into community life and sharpen public awareness of their needs;
- urged its member churches to work more closely with and continue to serve the needs of Asian and Pacific Island immigrants and refugees;
- celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Council's Agricultural Missions agency;
- asked its member churches to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Migrant Ministry, particularly during Farm Worker Week 1981, from April 27 to May 3.

Other resolutions passed during the three-day meeting included statements on the crisis in the public schools, on U.S. government production of chemical weapons, and on the resurgence of anti-semitism in France and around the world.

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The first statement noted the deterioration of elementary and secondary education, particularly in poor urban areas, and urged the NCC and its member churches to study the problem and respond with program initiatives.

On the subject of chemical weapons, the Board pointed out that Congress has appropriated \$3.15 million to build a new chemical weapons facility in Pine Bluff, Ark., part of a \$4 billion, ten-year program.

The resolution urged the Senate to reject a further appropriation of \$19 million for the Arkansas plant, already passed by the House. It also backed negotiations with the Soviet Union to ban chemical weapons, and asked the U.S. government to fund research into protection against toxic leaks from the current chemical weapons stockpile, rather than further production.

On the subject of anti-semitism, the board urged its member churches and religious leaders to speak out in protest against the recent upsurge of violence against Jews in France.

At this meeting, members heard words of thanks for their past support from a variety of speakers, including ex-Iranian-hostage Richard Queen, United Farm Workers leader Cesar Chavez, and textile union organizer Crystal Lee Sutton, the model for the movie "Norma Rae."

The Governing Board, which includes 266 representatives of 32 Anglican, Protestant and Orthodox church bodies, meets every six months to set policy for the Council.

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